THE VERY BEST OF

STEELY DAN

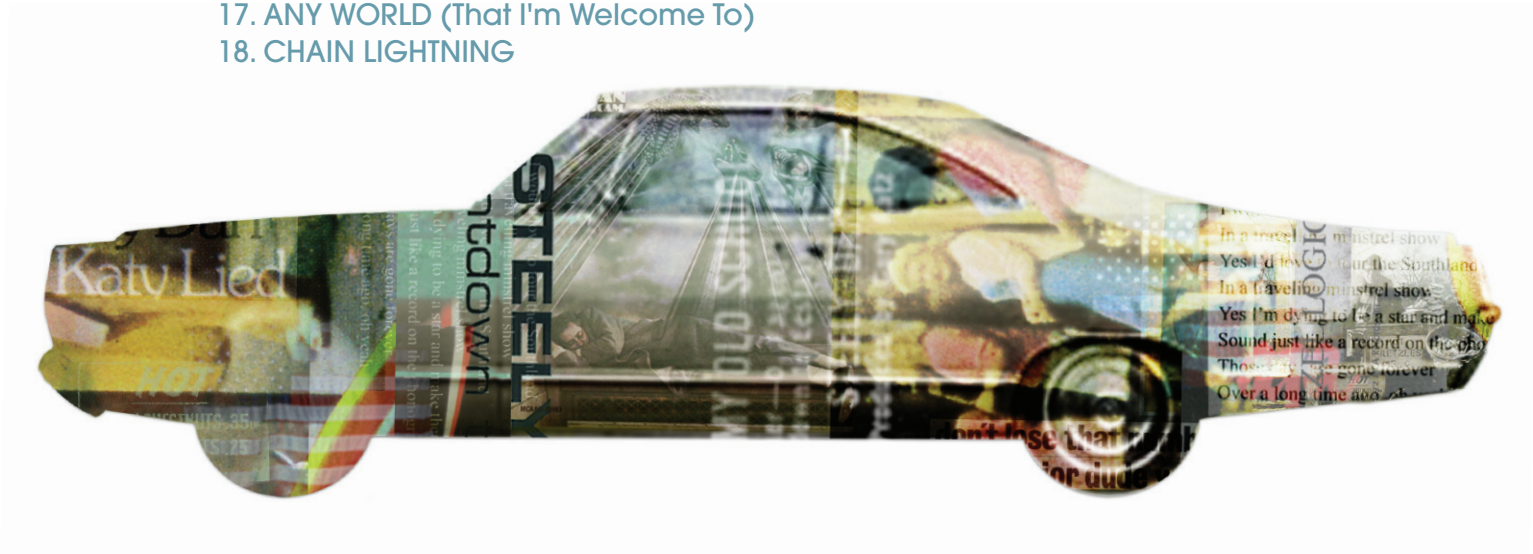
Includes: Rikki Don't Lose That Number • Do It Again
Reelin' In The Years • Showbiz Kids • Aja • Deacon Blues • Haitian Divorce
Black Friday • Any Major Dude Will Tell You *plus many more*

Disc One

1. DO IT AGAIN
2. DIRTY WORK
3. REELIN' IN THE YEARS
4. ONLY A FOOL WOULD SAY THAT
5. CHANGE OF THE GUARD
6. BODHISATTVA
7. THE BOSTON RAG
8. SHOW BIZ KIDS
9. MY OLD SCHOOL
10. RIKKI DON'T LOSE THAT NUMBER
11. NIGHT BY NIGHT
12. PRETZEL LOGIC
13. ANY MAJOR DUDE WILL TELL YOU
14. BLACK FRIDAY
15. BAD SNEAKERS
16. DOCTOR WU
17. ANY WORLD (That I'm Welcome To)
18. CHAIN LIGHTNING

Disc Two

1. KID CHARLEMAGNE
2. DON'T TAKE ME ALIVE
3. HAITIAN DIVORCE
4. THE FEZ
5. HERE IN THE WESTERN WORLD
6. BLACK COW
7. AJA
8. DEACON BLUES
9. PEG
10. JOSIE
11. FM
12. BABYLON SISTERS
13. HEY NINETEEN
14. TIME OUT OF MIND
15. THIRD WORLD MAN



Somewhere in New York in the early 1970s, a rip opened in the space time continuum, allowing a two headed alien jazz fiend through to our world from a parallel dimension. Assuming the unlikely guise of two Jewish students (a long haired, bearded hippy named Walter Becker and an expressionless, leather-jacketed street hustler named Donald Fagen) the alien intelligence attempted to communicate with our culture through the universal language of music. Adopting the name Steely Dan (not, as widely reported, in homage to beat sci-fi author William Burroughs' future vibrator but actually for the far more prosaic reason that it translates as "We Come In Peace" in the argot of its home planet) the alien entered into a mind meld with recording studios in New York and Los Angeles, sending out messages employing various rhythmic forms popular in the era, from 12 bar boogie to blaxploitation funk. Sadly Steely Dan was too far ahead of our time to make itself properly understood. In the course of eight increasingly desperate years, Steely Dan's attempts to establish whether there was intelligent musical life on earth drove some of the greatest session musicians in the world to the brink of despair and insanity in a quest for perfection beyond human comprehension, the cosmic search for the universal chord. While Steely Dan itself deemed the mission a failure, finally giving up at the end of the 70s (in the process releasing Becker and Fagen from mental slavery, allowing them to stumble on as frankly rather bewildered solo artists), an accidental by-product of the alien invasion was the production of some of the most sublime and original popular music of that (or any other) decade.

As implausible as all this may sound, it is surely the only rational explanation for the existence of Steely Dan, a group who seem to exist outside of pop culture. Their sleek, glistening reinvention of pop forms with jazz modalities sounds unlike any other music of the era, and still, for many, represents the pinnacle of pop sophistication. Are we really expected to believe that this outstanding catalogue of albums, from 'Can't Buy A Thrill' in 1972 to 'Gaucho' in 1980, is the work of a couple of English lit drop-outs from Bard College, an undistinguished New York educational establishment? If this duo were really such a pair of geniuses, how come their stint as wannabe Brill Building songwriters in the late Sixties was such a flop? I rest my case.

Steely Dan existed in an entirely different musical dimension to all of their contemporaries, a parallel universe where pop music was actually a form of Blue Note jazz. Imagine if Miles Davis and John Coltrane got together and wanted to make hits, blending uber cool 50s noir jazz with southern boogie, and topping it over with wry, super-smart lyrics. We are not talking jazz fusion here, nor jazz rock, nor any of the other aberrations that occur when rockers start messing about with modular chords. We are talking about a sinuous blend of groove, harmonic structure and frankly outrageous playing.

Steely Dan songs are constructed around pulsing, fluid bass rhythms (that would mostly be Becker) topped off with sardonic, wry lyrics (that would mostly be Fagen) and with acres of space inbetween for the world's brightest musicians to fill in with notes. But not just any notes, they had to be the right ones. It is a truism in music to say less is more but you have to be truly brilliant to know how much less is actually more. Steely Dan records are never over-crowded. And yet there are a masses of instruments and acres of solos on Steely Dan records, from vibraphones, saxophones,

pedal steel, electric sitar. Fearless in their pursuit of pure music, there was nothing they wouldn't put on a record but crucially the Dan knew how to blend things together.

On the early albums ('Can't Buy a Thrill', 'Countdown To Ecstasy', 'Pretzel Logic') you can still hear some sort of connection to other things occurring in the musical continuum. The acoustic guitar is present in the middle of the mix providing a link to singer-songwriting, the harmonies owe something to West coast soft rock, and there are pop songs floating about, albeit not, perhaps, as others might recognise them. 'Reelin In The Years' showed that, for a couple of cool jazz heads, they could be a kick ass rock'n'roll band if they wanted to be. 'Rikki Don't Lose That Number' almost has a heart, beating on a bossa nova pulse that sounds like a reinvention of the oldest bassline in the world. They could apparently take any musical style and reconfigure it with sophisticated arrangements so that the results were neither homage nor pastiche, but something entirely new. 'Bodhisattva' is, in essence, 50's rock'n'roll played by people who saw no reason why they couldn't use thirty chords to play a three chord trick. But they were also smart enough to know when one chord could do the trick just as well: 'Showbiz Kids' is a relentless mantra that never gets dull.

...two mad professors, a pair of taciturn studio wizards

But by 'Katy Lied' in 1975, Steely Dan stopped pretending to be an American pop group and became nothing other than what they were: musicians with a vision. Becker and Fagen were streaking ahead of themselves and everyone else, hiring and firing with impunity, employing the crème de la crème of the professional music world to play everything from a tambourine up. Classic jazz player Victor Feldman guested on marimbas and vibes. The Crusaders funky jazz guitarist ripped out dazzling solos (check out Kid Charlemagne from 'The Royal Scam'). The experience often proved heartbreaking for the players, as great musicians were usurped by the next great musician in pursuit of whatever glistening sonic perfection the duo could hear in their heads. Allegedly very bad at hitting the talk back button and offering encouragement, Becker and Fagen must have seemed like two mad professors, a pair of taciturn studio wizards in a world of their own making. Top session men cold be reduced to tears, as they were made to play their parts over and over again. Becker and Fagen were so ruthless, they would even hire other musicians to replace their own parts if they thought they weren't up to scratch. Album recording budgets and deadlines stretched towards infinity. They were The Men Who Could Not Be Rushed.
The only bit of a Steely Dan record that is not perhaps pure virtuoso is Donald Fagen's reedy, nasally lead vocal. But this (albeit surrounded by stacks of soulful backing vocals, sometimes by Doobie Brother Michael McDonald) is what gave flavour and focus to the songs. With a New York Jewish wryness that owes as much to Woody Allen as Bob Dylan, Steely Dan conjured sardonic, ironic character studies from a world of dime store noir novels, tales of gigolos, sharks, losers down to their last peseta and other luckless humans in crisis, told with no pretensions, no sentimentality, no self delusion. They are some of the finest lyrics in popular music, and Fagen's was an ideal voice to bring conviction to such deadpan narrative poetry.

Steely Dan were in the business of impeccable. By Aja (1977) and Gaucho (1980) they had entered another zone. Having relocated to LA (a city of glittering air conditioned seduction perfectly distilled in their lyrics) and brought in some of the greatest jazz players in the world, they reached the apex of their fluid jazz pop. Somehow, this was always where it was going to lead: pristine, perfect, every rough edge eradicated. It was jazz pop in which they had somehow extracted the pop from the equation altogether.

And with that final glimpse of musical perfection, Steely Dan disappeared back into the mysterious dimension from whence they came (albeit reappearing periodically in their quantum jumping spaceship to provide tantalising reminders of what we have been missing). Some say they drove themselves and everyone around them crazy. The session men of LA and NY were probably glad to see the back of them. Record industry bosses will tell you that they were infuriating perfectionists, always over-budget and over-time. But, for we mere mortal music fans, the results always spoke for themselves. Their records stands as a testament to their heroic idealism. So, one more time, let's go back, Jack, and do it again.

Neil McCormick
June 2009

Disc One

1. DO IT AGAIN 5:56
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd.
℗ 1972 Geffen Records

2. DIRTY WORK 3:08
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1972 Geffen Records

3. REELIN' IN THE YEARS 4:37
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1972 UMG Recordings, Inc.

4. ONLY A FOOL WOULD SAY THAT 2:57
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1972 UMG Recordings, Inc.

5. CHANGE OF THE GUARD 3:39
Written by Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1972 UMG Recordings, Inc.

6. BODHISATTVA 5:18
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1973 UMG Recordings, Inc.

7. THE BOSTON RAG 5:40
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1973 UMG Recordings, Inc.

8. SHOW BIZ KIDS 5:25
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1973 UMG Recordings, Inc.

9. MY OLD SCHOOL 5:46
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1973 Geffen Records

10. RIKKI DON'T LOSE THAT NUMBER 4:32
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1974 Geffen Records

11. NIGHT BY NIGHT 3:39
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1974 UMG Recordings, Inc.

12. PRETZEL LOGIC 4:32
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1974 UMG Recordings, Inc.

13. ANY MAJOR DUDE WILL TELL YOU - 3:08
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1974 UMG Recordings, Inc.

14. BLACK FRIDAY 3:41
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1975 UMG Recordings, Inc.

15. BAD SNEAKERS 3:21
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1975 UMG Recordings, Inc.

16. DOCTOR WU 3:55
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1975 UMG Recordings, Inc.

17. ANY WORLD (THAT I'M WELCOME TO) 3:55
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing / Red Giant Inc.
℗ 1975 UMG Recordings, Inc.

18. CHAIN LIGHTNING 2:59
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1975 UMG Recordings, Inc.

Disc Two

1. KID CHARLEMAGNE 4:37
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1976 UMG Recordings, Inc.

2. DON'T TAKE ME ALIVE 4:14
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1976 UMG Recordings, Inc.

3. HAITIAN DIVORCE 5:49
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1976 UMG Recordings, Inc.

4. THE FEZ 3:58
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen /
Paul Laurence Griffin
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1976 UMG Recordings, Inc.

5. HERE IN THE WESTERN WORLD 4:00
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1978 UMG Recordings, Inc.

6. BLACK COW 5:07
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1977 UMG Recordings, Inc.

7. AJA 7:56
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: ABC Dunhill Music Inc.
℗ 1977 UMG Recordings, Inc.

8. DEACON BLUES 7:33
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal / MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1977 UMG Recordings, Inc.

9. PEG 3:55
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Universal/MCA Music Ltd
℗ 1977 UMG Recordings, Inc.

10. JOSIE 4:30
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: MCA Music Publishing
℗ 1977 Geffen Records

11. FM 5:06
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Hornall Brothers Music Ltd. / Kobalt
Music Publishing Ltd.
℗ 1978 UMG Recordings, Inc.

12. BABYLON SISTERS 5:49
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Hornall Brothers Music Ltd. / Kobalt
Music Publishing Ltd.
℗ 1980 UMG Recordings, Inc.

13. HEY NINETEEN 5:06
Written by Donald Fagen / Walter Becker
Published By: Hornall Brothers Music Ltd. / Kobalt
Music Publishing Ltd.
℗ 1980 Geffen Records

14. TIME OUT OF MIND 4:10
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: Freejunket Music / Zeon Music
℗ 1980 UMG Recordings, Inc.

15. THIRD WORLD MAN 5:13
Written by Walter Becker / Donald Fagen
Published By: Freejunket Music / Zeon Music
℗ 1980 UMG Recordings, Inc.

Steely Dan C1973
from Countdown to Ecstasy

All Tracks Produced By Gary Katz
Package: This Compilation
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CD2: 5320452

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STEELY DAN